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ABSTRACT

This study compares the perceptions of the educational pclicymaking process held by education interest group staffs with thcse of State legislators. Structured interviews were held with executive officers in six major education organizations, and 207 legislators were surveyed by personal interviews during the 1969 legislative session. Categories for comparison included (1) how legislaticn is moved, (2) roles of committees, (3) chairmen and house leadership, (4) the function of legislative experts, and (5) interest group influence. Results indicate that education groups tend to generalize leadership's control, underplay nonparty aspects, and underestimate experts' informal influences. These findings imply that greater differentiation of strategies can be utilized by education interest groups in dealing with the legislature. (Hard copy may reproduce poorly because of marginal legibility.) (Author/LLR)

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Perceptions of the Educational Policy-Making Process in New York State: Educational Interest Group Leaders and State Legislators

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Perceptions of the Educational Policy-Making Process in New York State: Educational Interest Group Leaders and State Legislators

Mike M. Milstein and Robert E. Jennings

Introduction*

As the states increase their support of public education, educational interest groups (i.e., administrator organizations, school board organizations, teacher organizations, and various education-related citizens' organizations) increase their state-level activities. These groups clamor for education's "fair share" of state resources. At the same time, many state legislatures and executives have lately begun to reshape their roles in educational policy making, moving from passive reaction to active participation. They are increasingly taking on specialized staff personnel who scrutinize legislative requests and occasionally develop original legislative proposals. Such concern for the policy-making initiative, noted as early as 1960 in California (Iannaccone, 1967) is beginning to be felt in other states.

Educational interest groups in the past have generally been able to impress state legislatures of the special nature of education. Today, they find these bodies less receptive to their demands. The increasing responsibility of state governments, in an ever-broadening definition of public responsibility, for "soft areas" such as medical care, unemployment insurance and other social welfare programs has had an affect upon the support of public education. There are already indications of increasing competition for the public dollar, requiring educators to devise new tactics at the state level.

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*The data reported here constitute finding from a major study being conducted under the auspices of an Office of Education Grant. "Educational Policy Making in New York State with Emphasis on the Role of the State Legislature," USOE Small Grants Program, Project #9-8-030, Co-Investigators: Robert E. Jennings and Mike M. Milstein.

The Study

The major purpose of the present research was to analyze the process of educational policy-making in New York State. The focus was upon the role of the formal governmental structure and, in particular, on the role of the state legislature. How that role is perceived by legislators and by interest group officials set the parameters and methodological procedures for the study.

The New York State Legislature is constitutionally responsible for education in the state. In the period since World War II, it has come to interpret this responsibility quite broadly. Totaling $115,774,000 in 1940, the state's support of education is estimated to be $2,665,000,000 in 1970 (N.Y. State Statistical Year Book, 1968-69). The rapidly increasing financial input has propelled education into a central and continuing issue area in the policy-making process.

At the same time that educational interest groups have focused their efforts at the state level, formal governmental agencies have come to interpret their own roles in educational decision making as activist in nature. Therefore, the study explored the relationships between the interest groups and the formal governmental agencies from the vantage point of the policy-making process within the governmental structure. This is a rather unique focus for studies dealing with educational policy-making at the state level.*

The policy-making process can be conceived of as a system in which individuals, groups and organizations compete for the allocation of scarce resources. For purposes of the study, individuals, groups and organizations can be thought of as involved in the policy-making system when their actions are directly related to the process of educational decision making at the state level.

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*Bailey et. al. (1962), Masters, et. al. (1964) are major studies dealing with state level educational policy-making. These studies focused on the educational interest groups, not the legislative process.

Include in the analysis of educational policy-making are formal governmental organizations, the many agencies and officers who act in their behalf and the interest groups who interact with them when educational policy-making is in process. For example, educational administrators become part of the system when their activities are focused on affecting educational policy-making at the state level. Taxpayers' associations become part of the system when they are involved in influencing the formal government on school related matters. The state legislature and the governor's office are components of the system when their activities have implications for the organization and support of education in the state.

Four research methods were employed: documentary search, unstructured interviews, structured interviews and depth-surveys. Documentary searches were carried out to help the researchers identify critical processes and actors involved in educational policy-making. Documents explored included political party platforms, legislative committee reports, legislative regulations and by-laws, resolutions, public statements, proposed legislation, memorandums, hearings transcripts and interest group publications. Documentary searches were continued through the course of the study to verify, modify and otherwise help shape the analysis.

Unstructured interviews were then pursued with these actors, both within the formal governmental structure and among the interest group leadership, who the documentary searches identified as critical persons in the policy-making process. These interviews expanded upon the knowledge gained in documentary searches and further helped to clarify the focus and parameters of the study. Persons interviewed included interest group leaders, legislative counsels and executive agency officials in the Governor's Office, the Division of the Budget, the Office of Planning Coordination and the State Education Department.

On the basis of information gathered through documentary searches and unstructured interviews, a sharper focus for the study was delineated. Structured interviews with interest group leaders were then carried out to discover their perceptions of the legislative process as it concerns educational policy-making. These perceptions were checked against those of legislators to determine the extent of perceptual congruency between these two groups. Structured interviews were conducted with leaders of the following organizations:

Big Six School Boards Association
Citizens Public Expenditure Survey, Inc.
Conference of Mayors, New York State
Educational Conference Board
Empire State Federation of Teachers / United Federation of Teachers
New York Schools Boards Association
New York State Teachers Association

Finally, an in-depth survey instrument adopted from Wahlke, et. al. (1962) was administered to state legislators. Of the 207 state legislators in the 1969 New York State Legislature (150 Assemblymen and 57 Senators), 117 responded to a request for a substantial time commitment to complete the survey instrument (90 Assemblymen and 27 Senators). This represents a 57 per cent response (60% of all Assemblymen and 47% of all Senators). The instrument was administered by the investigators and advanced graduate students in Educational Administration and Political Science from the State University Centers at Buffalo and Albany. Resultant data were coded, programmed and run on computers at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

The remainder of the paper will summarize data which are comparative in nature--contrasting perceptions of educational interest group leaders with those of state legislators concerning the educational policy-making process at the state level, particulary within the state legislature. The first task will be to summarize the methods pursued by selected educational interest groups in influencing the policy-making system. The second task will be to present findings of the survey of state legislators concerning their perceptions of the

policy-making system. The focus will be on the extent to which these perceptions are compatible. Implications will then be drawn concerning the effectiveness of educational interest groups' influencing activities.

The Educational Interest Groups: How They Attempt to Influence Processes

In this section the tactics pursued by selected educational interest groups in influencing educational legislation, as reported by leaders of these groups, will be described. These groups include the New York State Teachers Association, the New York School Boards Association, the Council of School District Administrators, and the coalition body to which these organizations belong, the Educational Conference Board. In addition the tactics of two organizations which are not members of the Educational Conference Board, the Conference of Big Six School Districts and the Empire State Federation of Teachers/United Federation of Teachers will be described. The section will be summarized by a description of commonalities and differences in tactics employed by these organizations.

Figure I presents, in capsulated form, the results of extensive conversations with educational interest group leaders concerning the policy-making process at the state level and ways in which these groups operate to influence that process. Although the groups vary in purposes, there are several commonalities among them which can be explored. That is, there appears to be a pattern of perceptions and activities which holds constant across these groups; patterns which, on the basis of past experience, they feel will maximize their influence on the policy-making process.

FIGURE I

Selected Educational Interest Groups: Perceptions of the Policy-Making Process

Educational Interest Groups	Objective	View of the Control Point in the Policy-Process	Tactics Employed in Influencing the Legislative Process	Persons Responsible for Influencing Policy-Making
New York State Teachers Association	Improved Working Conditions and Welfare of Teachers	Governor --- Office and Program	1. Reach Legislative Leadership and Chairmen of Key Committees. 2. Supply Information (Extensive Research Capacity)	1. Executive Secretary and One or Two Key Staff Members. 2. Letters from Association Members.
New York School Boards Association	Relief of Local School Districts from Burden of Excessive Financial Support for Education	Governor --- Executive Budget, Division of Budget and Office of Local Government	1. Explain NYSBA Program to Governor and His Counsels. 2. Reach Legislative Leadership and Chairmen of Key Committees. 3. Talk with Legislators in the Districts.	1. Executive Secretary and One or Two Key Staff Members. 2. Regionally and Locally, School Boards Talk with Legislators.
Council of School District Administrators	Similar to NYSBA with Added Special Concerns for Maintenance of Their Position within the Educational Hierarchy	Governor --- Budget and Program	1. CSDA Convention to Set Legislative Plans. 2. Reach Legislative Leadership and Chairmen of Key Committees. 3. CSDA Advisory Board to Influence Commissioner of Education. 4. Administrators Talk with Legislators in the Districts.	1. President of the Council. 2. Committee on Legislation. 3. Local Administrators Talk with Their Legislators.

Educational Interest Groups	Objective	View of the Control Point in the Policy-Process	Tactics Employed in Influencing the Legislative Process	Persons Responsible for Influencing Policy-Making
Educational Conference Board	Increased State Support for Education: Encompasses Needs Which Cross Over Those of Individual Member Organizations	Governor --- Control of the Legislature	1. Studies of Costs of Education and the Fiscal Condition of School Districts. 2. Development of Programs for Legislation. 3. Get Program Adapted by Governor. 4. Capture Commissions Set Up by Governor and Legislature. 5. Various Tactics Developed Due to Diversity of Membership.	Constituent Groups
Conference of Big City School Districts	Unique Fiscal and Programming Needs of the Large Cities	Governor and Mayors and Other City Officials	1. Influence Mayors and City Officials to Contact the Governor. 2. Influence Commissioner of Education to Contact Governor. 3. Data Gathering for Legislative Leadership and Key Committees. 4. Data Gathering for Local Boards and Administrators to Influence Legislators.	Executive Secretary

Educational Interest Groups	Objective	View of the Control Point in the Policy-Process	Tactics Employed in Influencing the Legislative Process	Persons Responsible for Influencing Policy-Making
Empire State Federation of Teachers / United Federation of Teachers	Improved Working Conditions and Welfare of Teachers, Especially in New York City	Governor and N. Y. C. Mayor and Other City Officials	1. Influence Mayor and City Government of New York City. 2. Influence N. Y. C. Area Legislators Who Then Contact Upstate Legislature.	1. President of UFT. 2. Legislative Representative.

All of these educational interest groups see the governor's office as the critical access point to the policy-making process. Several reasons were given by respondents for this conclusion. First, the governor, as a state-wide elected official is in a good position to bring state-wide influence to bear on an issue. Second, as the recognized leader of his party, he can bring great influence to bear on his party's state legislators. For the past several sessions of the New York State Legislature this has been especially important because the governor's party has controlled one or both chambers of the legislature. Third, the governor is responsible for developing an executive program and an accompanying executive budget which forecasts the states programmatic and fiscal needs and, in turn, establishes the major tasks for legislative activities. Thus, in the view of the educational interest groups his unique position makes the governor a critical entrée point to the policy-making process.

Within the legislature itself, interest group leaders focus their activities on the legislative leadership. Typically educational interest groups define "legislative leadership" as the Speaker, the Chairman of the Ways and Means Committee and the Chairman of the Educational Committee in the Assembly and the Majority Leader, the Chairman of the Finance Committee and the Chairman of the Education Committee in the Senate as well as the minority leader in each chamber. A secondary tactic, and one less universal in application, is to influence individual legislators in their home district. In this instance, contact activities are carried on by the interest group membership.

In most instances educational interest group leaders reported that their most important influencing mechanism is the information gathering potential of their organizations. This is particularly true of the New York State Teachers Association, the Educational Conference Board and the Conference of Big City School Districts. The basic assumption

behind the data gathering activities of these organizations is that through their unique ability to provide necessary information, they are able to influence the processing of educational legislation. Often other educational interest groups, such as the New York School Boards Association and the Council of School District Administrators use the data gathering capacities of these organizations rather than carry on this costly research process.

Responsibility for carrying on the activities of the interest groups appears to reside both at the state and the local level. That is, in most instances there is an office established in the state capital with at least one individual responsible for the daily activities of the organization, including visits with the governor's aides and the legislative leadership. At the same time it is expected that, as organizational objectives concerning educational legislation develop, members within the organization will apply pressure on their legislators from "the grass-roots" level. In addition, the urban oriented educational interest groups attempt to involve local governmental officials to press legislators and the governor for educational needs.

In summary, then, educational interest groups 1) see the governor's office as the focal point for influencing policy-making activity; 2) view the legislature as centrally controlled by a handful of legislators who hold key positions within that body; 3) feel that their most potent weapon in influencing the policy-making process is their ability to gather necessary data concerning the state of education in New York, and make subsequent recommendations concerning the need for policy modifications; and 4) vest the power of influencing the policy-making process in the hands of one or two organization officials who maintain contact with policy-making officials in Albany, but expect that the membership throughout the state will provide local pressure to their individual legislators to achieve organizational objectives concerning educational legislation.

The Legislature: Perceptions of Policy-Making Processes and the Influence of Interest Groups

Bringing about desired policy change is a long and complex process. Much of this occurs long before formal measures are introduced in the legislature (e.g., policy modifications begin in dissatisfaction stages, are developed in crystalization of opinion stages, and surface as formulation of alternatives to present policies in extensive debate stages). The legislature formally becomes involved late in the process, once ideas have been outlined and support has been developed.* At this point, the legislature becomes the focal point for translating proposals into state policy. How legislators perceive the process at this latter stage is important for the way the legislature treats the many bills which are introduced annually into the legislative hopper (up to 15,000 in a single legislative session).

The ways in which the legislature goes about its task of making policy relate directly to behavioral norms which develop over time. Legislators operate within a set of real and imaginary constraints which significantly affect how they interact with their fellow legislators and with persons outside the legislative body. They are subject to much pressure from individuals and groups, both within and outside of the state legislature. Within the legislature they interact with their colleagues, committee chairmen and party leaders. Outside of the legislature they interact with executive agency personnel, interest group representatives and various subgroups within their constituency. All of these groups and individuals mix to influence legislators as they vote on educational issues.

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*It is understood that many legislators may become active in idea formulation and debate long before issues reach the legislature. However, as a formal body, the state legislature is not involved until the latter stages of the policy-making process.

New York State legislators in general do not see educational legislation as differing from other substantive types of legislation. In fact 78 per cent of those who responded to the survey feel that educational legislation is treated the same way as any other substantive legislation. Most legislators feel that conflicts within the legislature, based upon 1) the differences of needs of New York City and upstate New York; 2) party differences; and 3) the traditional distrust of the cities by suburbs and rural areas also affect the way educational legislation is handled in the legislature.

Legislators are highly sensitive to educational issues. In fact, 38 of the respondents noted that education is an area of particular interest to them. This is the most frequently noted area of substantive interest reported by legislators; the second most important area is local government, noted by only 14 legislators. This sensitivity toward educational matters is confirmed by perceptions of legislators concerning the most critical issues before the 1969 legislature. These issues were budgetary considerations (76%); decentralization of school districts (56%); public employee matters -- in particular the state's collective negotiations act (23%); and abortion (13%). Thus the three most important issues before the legislature, according to respondents, were all educational issues. With this background, we can return to the four general findings concerning perceptions and tactics of educational interest groups, to see how well they correspond to perceptions of legislators.

The Governor's Office as The Focal Point of Policy-Making Activity

The educational interest groups feel that the most critical point of entry to the policy-making process is the governor's office. Legislators, on the other hand, feel that the governor's influence is not nearly so great. In fact, a large minority (41%) reported that they give the governor's position little or no attention when voting on bills. Forty-two per cent feel that consideration of the governor's position depends on the

specifics of particular situations.

When asked to rank the importance of specific groups on their views about educational legislation, legislators ranked the governor's executive agencies a poor eighth out of nine groups. Although it might be argued that the governor and the executive agencies can not be equated, the influence he has over these offices makes for a strong and direct relationship between them. In fact, several educational interest group leaders noted that they include these agencies in their attempts to influence the governor's program.

FIGURE II

Groups which are very important in influencing legislators' views about educational legislation

Groups	Percent of Legislators responding "very important" influencers
experts in the legislature	55%
people in the districts	48
education committees	39
educators back home	34
educational interest groups	25
legislative staff opinions	24
committees other than education	14
executive department agencies	8
party leaders	6

When the governor is perceived as influencial by legislators, it is 1) based upon his veto power (44%); 2) his relationship with the party leadership in the legislature (36%); and 3) the use of patronage at his disposal (32%). Interestingly, where educational interest group leaders feel that one of the critical influence bases available to the governor is his close relationship with the leadership within the legislature, legislators' responses did not agree with this view. A mere nine percent felt that the leaders play a significant role in overseeing the governor's program.

The Legislature as a Highly Centralized Policy-Making Body

Educational interest groups report that the focus of their activity within the legislature is upon the recognized leadership in each chamber. Educational interest group leaders concentrate their activity where they feel there is the most potential for results--within the formal leadership of the legislature because they believe the legislature is a highly centralized policy-making body.

Again, there is a significant difference in the way the educational interest group leaders and the legislators view the legislature's operations. Already noted is the fact that very few responding legislators (3%) view the legislative leaders as overseeing the governor's program. Also, as noted in Figure II, only six percent of responding legislators feel that their party leaders influence how they decide about how to vote on pending legislation.

There are additional data which indicate a wide discrepancy in perceptions of legislators and interest group leaders concerning the degree to which the legislature is a centralized decision-making body. A highly centralized legislative body requires the parties to maintain tight discipline among their members. However, only 38 percent of the responding legislators agreed that there is tight party discipline. Sixteen percent feel that there might be tight party discipline, depending upon the issue at hand. Most legislators acknowledged that they consider the views of their party leaders before they vote on a bill, but, contrary to expectations, only 32 percent noted that a critical factor in considering the party leader's position is whether the bill is a party measure. In fact, a majority of the respondents feel that there are definitely times when a legislator should not vote with his party. In particular, he should be free to vote the dictates of his conscience (55%) and should give preference to his district's needs over

those of his party (59%).

The focal point of the legislative process is the committee system. It is to committees that individual legislators must bring proposed legislation for study, review and approval before it may reach debate and voting on the chamber's floor. The committee chairman plays a crucial role in the committee structure. Legislators feel (40%) that he is able to foster or hinder the flow of a bill. In fact, 24 percent of the responding legislators referred to the chairman as having "life or death" power over the destiny of a bill. It should be noted, however, that a similar number (26%) felt that the party leaders control the committees. Partially this is because the leadership makes committee chairmenship appointments. Nevertheless, 63 percent of the respondents recognized the fact that legislation is most expeditiously moved when legislators contact the appropriate committee chairman and/or other members of that committee. Suprisingly few (14%) feel it is necessity to speak with the chamber's leadership to assure the success of a measure. Legislators reported that they seek out other legislators about a bill because they have good judgment and general knowledge or have seniority and expertise, not because they are part of the chamber's leadership.

The Educational Interest Group's Most Important Weapon: Information Supply

No legislator can be an expert in more than a few substantive areas. Consequently it becomes important that sufficient information be made available if legislators are to understand measures upon which they must vote. As reported earlier, educational interest groups see their ability to present complete and accurate data for consideration by legislators as their most important influencing weapon. However, there are many sources to which legislators can turn for information concerning proposed legislation. These sources are both within and outside the legislature. When asked what are the most

important sources of information available to legislators in studying the facts about bills, responding legislators noted the following:

FIGURE III

Sources of Information for Studying the Facts About Bills

Sources	Percent of Responding Legislators Noting Source
Centralized Legislative Research Agencies	74%
Interest Groups	24
Sponsor and Memorandum	20
Executive Agencies	16
Counsels, Legislative Staff, Committee Reports	13
The Leadership	5
Mass Media	4
Other Members	3

Information from interest groups ranked second, but far behind information sources from within the legislature itself and just ahead of several other information sources. In actual fact, in the past several years the legislature in New York has developed quite sophisticated information gathering systems in order to free itself of dependencies on the governor's executive agencies and outside interest groups. For example, when asked where they might turn to when no information seems available on a measure, only one percent said they check with interest groups for data. Actually interest groups ranked last in a list of 12 possible sources to turn for information.

Roles of Organizational Officials and Members in Influencing the Policy Making Process

Representatives of interest groups attempt to influence legislators in directions

which favor the needs of their memberships. Legislators spend much time in conversation with representatives of these groups and in reading their literature. Eventually they must decide how seriously to take their views into consideration when voting on legislation. It has already been noted that educational interest groups in New York see as their most potent influencing weapon, the collection and dissemination of data by one or two persons representing the membership of each group in the state capital. In addition, these organizations attempt to rally their memberships to influence their legislators at the district level.

According to responding legislators the three most powerful interest groups in New York are labor (79%), education (54%) and banking, finance and insurance interests (32%). Sixty-two percent feel that the size (or voting strength) of an interest group is its most important basis of power. Money (29%), effective propaganda (25%) and good organization (20%) trailed far behind the membership size criteria.* Educational interest group representatives, potentially, can use their large constituency size to good effect. This has not been tested extensively in New York, but legislators appear cognizant of the potential of such a voting block.

The most powerful interest groups in education, according to legislators are the Empire State Federation of Teachers / United Federation of Teachers (54%); the New York State School Boards Association (26%); and the New York State Teachers Association (23%). This ranking is somewhat unexpected because the New York State Teachers Association maintains a complex operation in the state capital, while the Empire State Federation of Teachers / United Federation of Teachers focuses its resources more at the local level, particularly in New York City. Another unexpectedly low visibility group is the Educational Conference Board (5%) which acts as a clearinghouse for so many major

educational interest groups in the state. Underlying the power of these specific groups, according to the respondent legislators are their voting strength (58%) and their knowledge/expertise/status bases (45%).

As noted in Figure II, educators back home rank above the formal interest groups as influencers. Of course these "educators back home" are, in reality, the local arms of the educational experts.

In summary then, concerning the four major variables discussed, the results indicate that there are several critical differences in perceptions of the policy-making process:

1. <u>The governor's office as the focal point of the policy-making process.</u>
   Interest group leaders perceive the governor and his executive agencies as the entrée point to the policy-making process. Legislators do not feel that the governor plays such an important role in this process. Rather, legislators feel that there is more policy-making initiative from within the legislature itself.

2. <u>The legislature as a highly centralized body.</u>
   Interest group leaders perceive the legislature as highly controlled by a few officers who carry the governor's program. Legislators feel that these party leaders have much less influence than supposed them by outsiders and that the leaders do not carry the governor's program in the legislature.

3. <u>Information as a potent interest group activity.</u>
   Educational interest group leaders feel that their most important influencing weapon is access to information which can be used by legislators in their decision-making process. Legislators feel that there are many sources of information at their disposal; interest group data is but one source and not often the most important.

4. <u>Representation of interest group concerns.</u>
   Educational interest groups concentrate their activities in the hands of a few men at the state capital and ask their membership to influence legislators from their home districts. Legislators feel that groups, educational and non-educational, from their home areas are more important than are the formal interest groups representatives in the state capital in influencing their actions.

Implications for Educational Interest Groups

These initial findings indicate that the New York State Legislature may not be so readily approached through "traditional" influencing strategies as it has been in the past. The strategies of the educational interest groups--focused on supplying information to the governor's office and the legislative leadership appear to have basic flaws. The governor's office may not have as much direct influence on the legislature as educational interest group leaders perceive. Similarly, the relative independence of legislators from the legislative leadership which respondents report indicates that representatives of the educational interest groups may have to differentiate their strategies within the legislature. Finally, the low visibility of the information gathering potential of educational interest groups reported by responding legislators indicates that educators had best find better ways of getting the facts they have gathered into the legislature's information net. One fact is clear; educational interest groups do not have a monopoly on information supply.

Even if the educational interest groups are able to make the necessary modifications to increase their impact at the state level, the results of the study indicate that the most important influence factor on the legislative process may, in the long run, be the ability of the memberships of these groups to influence legislators at the "grass-roots" level. Thus it probably is incumbent on these groups to step up activities at the school district and legislative district levels. This would require that they develop coordinating activities to enhance the potential for policy changes to come from these more decentralized levels. This would be a major change from the present state-wide program approach whereby the organizations concentrate their fiscal and human resources on lobbying activities at the state level.

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EDUCATIONAL POLICY MAKING IN NEW YORK STATE:
Perceptions of the Process Within the Legislature.

The study compared the perceptions held by education interest group staffs with the legislators' perceptions. Structured interviews were held with executive officers in six major education organizations and 207 legislators were surveyed by in-depth personal interview during the 1969 session. Categories for comparison included: how legislation is moved, roles of committees, chairmen and house leadership, the function of legislative experts, and interest groups influence. Results indicate the education groups tend to generalize leadership's control, underplay non-party aspects, and underestimate experts' informal influences. These imply that greater differentiation of strategies can be utilized by the groups in dealing with the legislature.

EDUCATIONAL POLICY MAKING IN NEW YORK STATE:
Perceptions of the Process Within the Legislature

Abstract

The problem was to describe and analyze the educational policy making process at the state level focusing on the role of formal government and the state legislature in particular. One purpose of the study was to compare the perceptions of the process within the legislature as held by education interest group staffs with the perceptions of the legislators themselves. The intent was to determine the similarities and differences in perception about various elements in the process, including formal and informal roles of individuals and groups. A behavioral approach to the problem was utilized in order to get beyond the institutionalized views of the process.

The methodology employed included structured interviews with staff personnel in six major education interest groups, and a survey of 207 legislators employing an in-depth personal interview. As a check on the information obtained, interviews were conducted with legislative staff members, officials in the executive branch and other knowledgeable observers of the legislative scene.

Interest group personnel interviewed were those considered most knowledgeable about the legislative activities of their organizations, the executive secretary or his associate and the chief legislative representative. A total panel of 11 persons was utilized: two each from the state teachers association, state school boards association, council of school district administrators, the united federation of teachers and the educational conference board, and one from the conference of big city school boards.

All 207 members of the 1969 legislature comprised a universe of legislators. Sustained efforts were made to interview each legislator during the 1969 session. However, complete interviews were obtained with only 60 per cent of the members. The number of interviews completed were, on inspection, considered representative of the entire body in terms of distribution by party, length of legislative service, house membership, age, occupational background, geographic area, committee membership and legislative officers.

The structured interview with the interest group personnel was devised for the study, based on previous work of the two co-investigators. The interview schedule for legislators was an adaptation of an instrument developed by Wahlke, et al., in 1957, for a study of four state legislatures. Education emerged as an issue area in their work. The adapted version was pre-tested with recently retired New York legislators.

For the purposes of analysis the perceptions of staff personnel in each of the interest groups were categorized as to the role of the legislature, how legislation is moved, the roles of committees, committee chairmen and the legislative leadership, the function of legislative experts, the influence of party and of the governor, as well as the differences in these items by house. Each staff person was asked to estimate the influence of his own group. In addition, a composite perception of the process was made for the six groups. The responses of the legislators were tabulated and frequency distributions obtained for each of the same categories. In addition, differences in the handling of education bills, as noted by legislators, were also compiled. Finally, legislators' opinions of the influence of education interest groups were tabulated. In the analysis, comparisons were made of the several sets of responses and similarities and differences noted.

All 207 members of the 1969 legislature comprised a universe of legislators. Sustained efforts were made to interview each legislator during the 1969 session. However, complete interviews were obtained with only 60 per cent of the members. The number of interviews completed were, on inspection, considered representative of the entire body in terms of distribution by party, length of legislative service, house membership, age, occupational background, geographic area, committee membership and legislative officers.

The structured interview with the interest group personnel was devised for the study, based on previous work of the two co-investigators. The interview schedule for legislators was an adaptation of an instrument developed by Wahlke, et al., in 1957, for a study of four state legislatures. Education emerged as an issue area in their work. The adapted version was pre-tested with recently retired New York legislators.

For the purposes of analysis the perceptions of staff personnel in each of the interest groups were categorized as to the role of the legislature, how legislation is moved, the roles of committees, committee chairmen and the legislative leadership, the function of legislative experts, the influence of party and of the governor, as well as the differences in these items by house. Each staff person was asked to estimate the influence of his own group. In addition, a composite perception of the process was made for the six groups. The responses of the legislators were tabulated and frequency distributions obtained for each of the same categories. In addition, differences in the handling of education bills, as noted by legislators, were also compiled. Finally, legislators' opinions of the influence of education interest groups were tabulated. In the analysis, comparisons were made of the several sets of responses and similarities and differences noted.

The results indicate there are several critical differences in perceptions of the process held by interest group staffs and legislators. There is agreement that educational legislation is treated generally the same as other bills. Items which have implications for state spending are considered as party bills, a fact of critical importance to legislators and difficult to change in the view of the interest groups. The legislative leaders in both houses are perceived as very important influences on the legislative process but the education groups generalize this influence to almost all proposed measures whereas legislators ascribe more influence to committee chairmen on routine items and the leadership on party measures. The groups tend to view committee chairmen as extensions of the majority leadership. Only where a committee chairman has shown a measure of influence with the leaders is he considered a separate element in the process. The interest groups underestimate the role of experts as informal opinion leaders in the legislature, unless an expert is also a committee chairman. The groups understand the characteristic differences between the senate and assembly and adjust strategy accordingly. Senate leaders and committee chairmen have relatively greater freedom from party discipline, a fact recognized by interest groups and legislators generally. The role of the governor in influencing legislation is perceived by legislators as being expressed through his power of veto and control of patronage. The education groups, on the other hand, see his role as one of setting program and convincing the legislative leadership that they must get it passed. The education groups see themselves as effective in matters of educational legislation, a result not entirely unexpected. However, legislators have a hierarchy of group effectiveness which is more related to the strength of education in their home districts than to the activities of the interest groups at the capitol.

The implications of these findings for educational policy making are several. The relative independence from the leadership enjoyed by individual legislators and committees in non-party measures should lead to greater differentiation of strategies according to proposals. Differentiation between the formal leadership and informal opinion leaders in the legislature would be helpful in this process. Just as the groups adjust their strategies to the characteristics of each house, so they must adjust their strategies to the characteristics of these two forms of leadership. More analysis is needed of the political implications of proposals, especially as they reach back also into home areas of legislators. Greater efforts could be directed at the local level by the education interest groups to make education more visible.

(MMM, REJ)